Infused with Place

The Translation of Scotland's Geography in Paintings of the Sea

By

Joe Boyd

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This book first published 2025

Ethics International Press Ltd, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Print Book ISBN: 978-1-83711-073-5

eBook ISBN: 978-1-83711-074-2

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Space, Place & Time

We don't own the land, we tend it briefly,
and the sea protects us, and keeps us.
And the sea links us; lets us in, and lets us leave.

Robin Robertson, 2019.

1. Joe Boyd, 2020, *Ten Thousand Miles of Edge*

1. Mark the Place

The photograph on the previous page is of an artwork projected onto an old tower to celebrate Edinburgh's New Year of 2020, a transcendent time for many. Words, music and projected maps described Scotland's coastline as '*Ten thousand miles of edge*'. Part of a Hogmanay 'Message from the Skies', it brightened the dark winter spaces around an empty hilltop whilst a voice intoned Robin Robertson's poem. With words, he searched for what he called 'the long pulse of Scotland' in the names of those places at its furthest edges. Ostensibly about the country's coastline, I was moved by his invocation to an island nation.

Yet this tower is Nelson's monument on Calton Hill, overlooking the Scottish capital. It was built in 1816 to declare Scotland's identity within a holistic British state.[1] And built at a time when this identity was being disavowed by many of Edinburgh's poorer inhabitants. Almost two centuries later, the modern artwork bathed the iconic British admiral's monument in images and poetry that portrayed a solitary island of Scotland, linked to Europe by sea. The loose land border with England appeared as just another coast, and the unionist stone was thus transformed by autonomous light. The installation had me thinking of borders and edges and geography.[2] What is behind images of Scotland's seas and coasts?

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[1] See McKee, 2013, for a full exploration of this contention.

[2] 'Robin Robertson's 'Ten Thousand Miles of Edge' takes us on a journey across Scotland's vast island and coastal geography, incorporating his personal reflections on what makes the country's seaside landscape so integral to Scotland's identity as an island nation.' City of Edinburgh Council, 2020.

A person in Scotland is never more than 45 miles from the sea. Scots, whilst seldom dipping their bodies in the waters, often have water on their minds. Their literature, music and theatre echo it; their images depict it. This is a familiar practice of our species, and humans have been making art at the coast for a very long time. There is rich archaeological evidence of patterned abstract symbols in the sand of ancient beaches in Southern Africa, drawn over 50,000 years ago during the Middle Stone Age. Archaeologists identified these symbols on a fossilised beach as a 'hominin signature'.[3] The sea has always provoked people.

Of course, the manner of that provocation will influence the artist's depiction. An overcast, windy day on the West Sands at St. Andrews will provoke a different mood than a still, hot day at Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro. This chapter introduces the idea that the place of art, artist and geography is one neglected key to unlocking a painting.

For example, consider this painting by Morris Grassie (1931-2023).

[3] Helm et al, 2019, passim.

The Sou'Westers, c1953

2. Morris Grassie, c1953, *The Sou'Westers, Arbroath*

A quick look in an art gallery reveals three men hauling boxes of fish onto a quayside. They wear oilskins, the yellow colour drawing the beholder's eye to the centre of the picture and perhaps missing the other two male figures in braces. These would suggest that this is a mid-twentieth-century view. The foreground features dead fish forms and one hungry herring gull, swooping into the frame, bolder than the others whose black silhouettes flap through a darkening sky. Against a high skyline, the houses crowd into the background, lined up across the water at the side of what may be an enclosed harbour, squeezed by lack of space and light.

There is much more to this picture though. Morris Grassie was my father-in-law, and I know that it meant a great deal to him.[4] He gave it to his mother Annie Grassie, who kept it on display in her house for 50 years. When Annie died, Morris donated the painting to Edinburgh's City Art Centre in memory of his wife, Mona.

The view is of the harbour at Arbroath, the town of the artist's birth. However, it requires a walk around that place to pinpoint the spot in the inner harbour where what is seen reflects the geometry in the scape of the picture. The artist has depicted what he could see as he looked towards the town from in front of the boat building yard (on the right of the picture), over the dock gates which manage the tidal water levels between the inner and outer harbour, towards the road where his family lived, and to the house where he was born. In the picture, Morris has chosen to depict a blustery day, with rain clouds filling the sky. Yet historical annual averages reveal that fewer than one third of the days in Arbroath have rain.

The painting is further illuminated by considering aspects of his own discourse. Morris wrote the following to the City Art Centre when he offered to gift the painting to the gallery.

> 'As a boy, I was fortunate to study at Hospitalfield[5] under James Cowie, the Scottish artist, and later as a postgrad I spent two summers at Hospitalfield under Ian Fleming, one with Joan Eardley as visiting artist. Fleming encouraged me to create the triptych of paintings based on the Arbroath Harbour, inspired by my knowledge of the area. As my grandmother had a house at the harbour, and my uncle and his brother owned a fishing

[4] Throughout this chapter, I name the artist *Morris* rather than *Grassie* because of my ongoing deep respect for the man.
[5] Hospitalfield has been a primary source of education and inspiration in 20th-century Scottish art. See Beardmore, 2018, passim.

> boat, I was able to do many studies of the area and they posed for my drawings. My uncle Thomas Adams and his brother Willie feature in all three paintings.'

Yet John Milne, Morris's cousin, discussed the painting with the artist after a family member thought that two of the figures represented Tom Adams and his brother.

'So I spoke to Morris about it. There were no known fishermen in the painting…. he was aware of the waterproof garments that the fishermen wore and [that they] could make an interesting painting.'

The apparent discrepancy is perhaps explained because Morris initially created preparatory drawings in 1953 for the triptych, modelling the figures on his Uncle Tom and Tom's brother. A few months later, in 1953, after his uncle had been killed in tragic circumstances when the Arbroath lifeboat capsized just outside the harbour, he painted the triptych. There would have been good personal reasons to anonymise the faces of the figures. The first of the triptych, titled *Muckle Meg*, is owned by the Kelvingrove Gallery in Glasgow.[6] The second was bought by a private collector. The *Sou'Westers* is the third.

Poet and musician, David Ross Linklater, was inspired by this picture to write a poem that he read at the 2020 Finalists' Ceremony for Scotland's primary poetry prize, The Edwin Morgan Poetry Award. The poem is reproduced below with the kind permission of the poet.

[6] Image of the painting *Muckle Meg*, illustration 42.

Pilgrim Territories

After 'The Sou'westers, Arbroath', Morris Grassie.

Hard work, my father taught the meaning.
Oily tracks on his palms handed down
from his father and his father before him.
Pilgrims of the water, casting, hauling buoys
rolling in kicks. Mind Finlay and Big Dick, old boys
out to catch the illusive thing, and no one knew what it was?
The Dawn, The Marigold Daughter cut through waves
rearing up with white hooves on cold mornings,
foam like buckshot from a magnificent shotgun,
the clouds raging bulls—gone to memory
with the men that sailed them. Other times
sea smooth as a glass disc, Bottlenoses doing
their silken dance, knowing to steer clear of Will Pat
and the boys out there netting the great blueness.
Once a shadow moved under the boat and it was like
God finally spoke, and bells tolled through mist.
Making it yield, a life passed down. Fingers a
thousand tides deep, gutting the silver skinned
chromosomes, keeping it all singing. I picked up tradition
as if it were a shoe, and tried some others in my time
but my body is water and I wear it like the seabed.
With my sou'wester yellow as a pale sun, I'll be gone.
And when I come home, wash the salt and oil
from the divots of my skin, sand will flash from the basin
like punctures in the night. The buoys out there, plain-faced.
I could not for the life of me know a world on land.[7]

From this brief account, the reader will appreciate how significantly a detailed study of place can more firmly connect the viewer with the

[7] Text provided courtesy of David Ross Linklater, 2024.

art. Similar advantages are possible by knowing a little about the person, in effect by situating the artist.

Introducing the artist

Morris was born and raised by Annie and George in the seaside town of Arbroath, studied at the art college in Dundee on the Tay estuary and settled in Edinburgh near the port of Leith. The smells, sounds and sights of the sea were seldom far away. Throughout the wide, varied and successful arc of his life, from start to finish, he was an artist. He had already begun to learn and practice high-quality painting skills when this school photograph was taken in Arbroath in April 1946.

3. Fifteen-year-old Morris Grassie at Arbroath High School, 1946

When Morris was still at school, the daughter of celebrated Scottish artist James Cowie borrowed two of his paintings to show her father. 'Mr Cowie was extremely pleased with my work and invited me out to his studio'.[8] So pleased indeed that Cowie asked that he bring his three 'best paintings' to Hospitalfield, the artists' college where Cowie was Principal, for a one-to-one masterclass. The schoolboy's paintings of local people and places were deemed accomplished enough for regular visits to the 'creepy castle-like building' to be instituted. In that year, three Grassie paintings were accepted for public exhibition by the Arbroath Art Society. Seventy years later, as artist and art educator, he posed for these three photographs overleaf.

[8] Grassie, 1947, Diary entry 21/8/47.

4. Boyd, 2016, *Photographs of Morris Grassie's work*. c1956, *self-portrait; artist's tools;* c1952, *White wall*

In the upper image, Morris stands before a self-portrait from 1956, with the tools of his creativity in hand. In the lower photograph, he is at Granton Harbour, close to his adult home, displaying his painting from c1952 of the boatyard at Arbroath Harbour, close to his childhood home. The white-painted wall and the fishing boat, the defining elements of place in that view, no longer existed as real objects when the photograph was taken in 2016.

Place the painting

Places were important to Morris's artistic development. We begin our contemplation of the importance of spatiality and place in art by situating several exemplar paintings from two places where this artist had been immersed.

Washing line, 1948

5. Morris Grassie, 1948, *Washing Line*

As a lad o'pairts, Morris was always interested in art. In his youth, he painted people and places familiar to him, including the landscapes, seascapes and townscapes of his home environment.[9] On a summer morning in 1948, he cycled with his watercolour paints and easel to a rural area and, returning there over a few days, executed this watercolour.

The view is of the side of a rural home. The space is divided horizontally into several enclosures by fence, wall, washing line and chimney smoke and vertically by the washing poles and framing trees. The image is bright and saturated, a situation that does not always pertain to Scotland in summer. Vivid colours contribute to an optimistic mood, which is accentuated by the tidiness of the drying green and the clean clothes that hang in sunlight. Even the weeds grow in rows.

The artist has positioned the viewer outside a barbed wire fence, looking in, observing the details that allow the place to be characterised.

Firstly, the place has spatial elements like topography and architecture. These delineate the flat land and the brown building with two skylight windows, distinctive details that would enable local people to identify where this view is set.

Secondly, there are components of the physical environment. The sky is an electric blue, a shade that in the 1940s signified modernity. It is cut by a long stream of thick smoke from the chimney, which suggests that there is a mild breeze and a moderate temperature, which necessitates a fire to heat the interior. The white blooms in the foreground, and the lavish leaves on the trees reveal that this view was experienced in mid-summer. The social environment is also

[9] The word *scape* can refer to a view or a scene. The former meaning is passive and neglects the intelligent perception and manipulation that an artist brings to place. This text will employ *scape* to mean a (dramatised) scene.

significant, insinuated by the hay and the basket on the green, by the girl on the swing, subtle prompts about work and family. Viewers are reminded of their own domestic experiences in their familiar environment.

Thirdly, a definition of place also carries a temporal meaning, which may or may not be explicit. Kevin Lynch expressed the idea more starkly by asking, *what time is this place?*[10] This place is identified with a handwritten calendar date, added below the painting. Also, there are specifics that represent family life in mid-twentieth century Scotland: the clothing of the girl on the swing, the washing pegged out to dry on a line, a home fire burning and so on.

Finally, a definition of place implies that the person is emotionally attached to a physical environment. Although attachment is difficult to describe and explain after the event, Morris did choose the place and was committed for several days to painting it. His choice of colour and form reflect how positive he felt as he sat looking intently at this building during several warm days in July 1948. I wondered where the house was, or had been, situated.

The four sources of definition – topographical, environmental, temporal and emotional - ensure that the place-making in this picture is complex. They also imply that the artist translated where he was situated. I had assumed that the building in the painting was part of a local farm until Morris's cousin, John Milne, who still lives in Arbroath, recognised it as part of the Hospitalfield estate. John writes

> 'The building, which has a distinctive design, was built for the owner [of Hospitalfield] Patrick Allen Fraser who was an artist. It was called a Print Studio, and we saw it during your visit

[10] Lynch, 1972.

> there. When Morris did the painting, there were obviously people living there. And he has added some interesting features. At the right-hand side near the clothes pole there is a small light bit and if you enlarge it, you will see a picture of a young child on a swing… on the middle-left hand you can see part of the water tower at the top of Keptie pond. It is to the left of the tree. You can actually see it from Hospitalfield (main building). The distinctive building is at the back, near the cafe where we went, and has a nice shape.'[11]

Local knowledge is invaluable in placing a painting. That this place was situated in Hospitalfield adds another strand of emotional attachment to Morris's depiction of this place at this time, given his ongoing encouragement from Cowie.

The Slipway, 1952

The Slipway was painted mid-century as evidenced by the industrial chimneys in view; these were demolished shortly afterwards. It may have been created in the early 1950s whilst Morris, then a student at Dundee College of Art, was in one of two residencies at Hospitalfield because the colouring and geometry are similar to those of Warden Ian Fleming's paintings. Several decades later, Morris entered this picture in a competition, offering it for sale for £1600.

[11] Milne, 2024. I visited Hospitalfield with John Milne. There is a photograph of the Keptie pond tower at https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/news/angus-mearns/635311/call-for-review-of-iconic-arbroath-building/

6. Morris Grassie, 1952, *The Slipway*

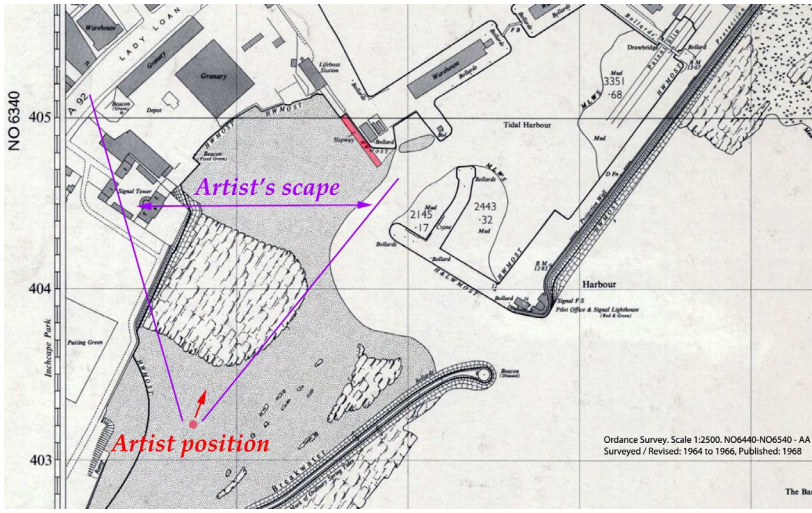
Someone who knows little about the place can still situate the painting by following clues within the artwork itself. For example, the back of a mounting board may reveal information about a picture. This one has a label with a typed quotation from Lewis Grassic Gibbon's novel, *Sunset Song*, one of the artist's favourites.

> 'And in the east against the cobalt blue of the sky lay the shimmer of the North Sea, and maybe the wind would veer there in an hour or so and you'd feel the change in life and strum of the thing, a streaming coolness out of the sea.'[12]

The label locates the painting on Scotland's east coast, facing the North Sea. The slipway is likely to be near Arbroath harbour because we

[12] This quotation is from the painting's label, not from a published text.

know that Morris was living in the town at this time and that he frequently took a portable easel and paints down to the shore. From a search online, several elements of the composed view can be identified, the two church steeples and the long red building, for example.[13] The two steeples are close together in the painting, the perspective suggesting that the artist was southwest of the harbour. The foreground of low rocks and sand implies that he stood on or just above the beach at low tide. A more detailed online search in the Library of Scotland mapping site revealed that the lifeboat slipway is in the same position as that of the painting. In the annotated map below, the slipway is coloured red, and Morris's likely position and field of vision, his scape, are marked.



7. Boyd, 2025, Mapping of *The Slipway*

[13] Google 'street view' is very useful for this kind of preliminary investigative work.

The meanings of this place for the artist are greatly deepened by local knowledge and experience. For example, Morris's cousin John writes that:

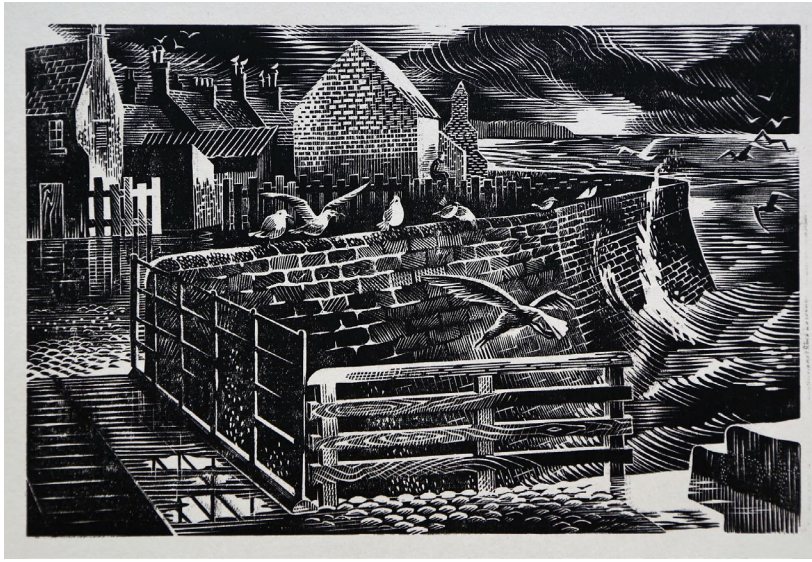
> 'This painting provides a distinctive view of the town area of Ladyloan on the A92. You can make out the steeple in the centre of the square. Also shown are a number of chimneys needed for the jute mills and the engineering factories. To have that view, he must have been sitting or standing on the protection wall, having climbed up from the end furthest away from the harbour. You show it clearly on your map. This map also shows the exit for boats from the harbour into the sea. This part is called "the bar" and is a dangerous bit for boats. … The painting shows a number of features in their proper locations … the very large shed at the left-hand side was used in 1947 after the war to contain the groundnuts (brought by) the government's failed scheme from Tanganyika in Africa. The lifeboat station is (also) on your map… with the slipway that took the lifeboat into the sea. The other side of the lifeboat station shows our granny's house, white coloured on the painting. Auntie Phyllis lived with her. In October 1953, there was a disaster when the lifeboat was driven over the protection wall into the rocks shown in the painting we are discussing. And when the lifeboat went down, they heard the men shouting because they lived very close to where it all happened. Phyllis's husband was on the boat.'[14]

The slipway therefore had strong personal memories for Morris; his Uncle Tom Adam was one of six crew members of the Arbroath lifeboat that were killed when the boat was capsized in rough seas just outside the harbour. As he looked later at this painting, he must have remembered his uncle, who used it. If *The Slipway* was painted after

[14] Milne, 2024.

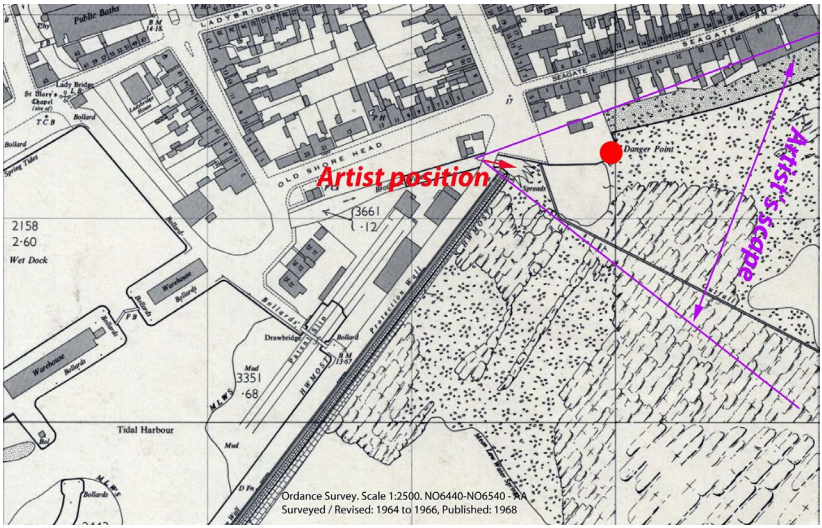
1953 then it is likely that these memories influenced the subdued colours that he chose to translate the scape.

Danger Point, c1950



8. Morris Grassie, c1950, *Danger Point, Arbroath*

This is one of three prints from an inked woodcut block. It is a claustrophobic view of a position on the town's old sea wall known locally as 'Danger Point'. Using the previous techniques, the place can be identified on the 1964 Ordnance Survey map as situated northeast of Arbroath harbour.



9. Joe Boyd, 2025, *Mapping of Danger Point*

Arbroath had a harbour from 1194, a development of an earlier Pictish landing site, which is thought to have been near to what is now called 'Danger Point'. The local name of this site is 'an ironic comment upon the sea's encroachment here; originally two more houses stood between the Old Brewhouse and the shore.'[15] A painting by Ian Fleming, Morris's tutor at Hospitalfield, illustrates the view from the beach. Fleming includes several thick wooden piles, tilted askew and reminiscent of the two swamped houses.[16]

Tropical Window, 1957

Morris was resident in other countries during most of the 1950s. He completed his national service from 1954 to 56 in various Southern European and North African places and then, after an unenjoyable

[15] Angus Council, 2024, p3.
[16] Fleming, 1949, *Danger Point*. Usher Gallery. https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/danger-point-arbroath-82012

year as a teacher of Art in a secondary school, he applied for a post in South America. The picture, *Tropical Window*, is dated 1957, which is the year that he took up a teaching post at Queen's College, British Guiana. Using the previous straightforward investigative techniques, it is possible to pinpoint where Morris painted this scape.

10. Morris Grassie, 1957, *Tropical Window*

The view of the place includes tropical plants in the foreground and palm trees and houses on stilts in the background. That this is what he saw from his own room in Georgetown is confirmed by his diary entries for April 1957.

During that month, he was often out with his easel in a fierce sun, which, he remarked, would dry the watercolour very quickly, making painting outdoors uncomfortable and also very tricky. On 15th, April, he stretched a full imperial sheet of Whatman, resolving to create a large watercolour of what he could see from the window of his room. He described its creation over the next few days.

> '16 April. Made a start to the drawing from the window, which is extremely interesting, full of difficult problems in drawing. I am trying to compose a picture including the shutter and looking out across the street.
>
> 18 April. Started painting the large watercolour with slight fear at handling large areas. The drawing is completely successful.
>
> 19 April. Good progress with the large watercolour completely covering surface with correct tone quality.'

He must have been finished by 25th April because he left on that day for a major expedition by boat, lorry and on foot to Kaieteur Falls, the highest waterfall in South America and 250km from Georgetown. There is no further mention of the painting in the diary. However, I know that it was hanging on his wall at home from 1963 until 2023.

Morris recorded in his diary that, after a very uncomfortable six weeks in a poor, noisy, disturbing lodging, he had moved in February 1957 to a hostel nearer to Queen's College school, where he had a post as Head of Art. Many of the buildings in the town have since been either

replaced or renovated since he lived there, but his diary reveals that his rented room was in a house on Lamaha Street that stood opposite a small railway station. Lamaha Street is a long road that runs through much of Georgetown on a west-east axis.

These few facts were enough to pinpoint where the house would have been. Though the railway station has now been demolished, its position was revealed by a local resident's video reports on YouTube. The painting's perspective suggests that Morris had rented a room on the first floor. It was at the rear of the house, facing away from the railway station towards uncultivated open land that has since been developed for housing.

11. Joe Boyd, 2024, Mapping of Georgetown, *British Guiana*

Painted boat, 1961

12. Morris Grassie, c1961, *Painted boat*

Where did Morris see this painted boat? The picture retains the bright, sun-drenched colouring of many of Morris's Guianan paintings, but it is not a depiction of the industrialised river port of Georgetown. That city developed on wetlands, and it is below sea level, protected from inundation by a high sea wall. In 1959, Morris had travelled through Ecuador, Mexico and the USA for 6 months on his way home to Scotland from British Guiana. Throughout the journey, he drew and painted what he saw. I initially thought that this picture was based on one of those drawings from South America.

However, a little investigation showed that the shape of the boat resembles that of a Portuguese sardine vessel, spotted in a 1909 print that was for sale on eBay in 2024. The buildings in the picture also have a similar shape to those that Morris painted later in life when he visited his friends on the Portuguese Atlantic coast. Further investigation

suggested that, once back in Scotland, he had spent several summers in the early 60s visiting his close friends from Georgetown, the Keates family, who had returned to live in Lisbon when Lawrence Keat's Guiana contract was fulfilled. Until the boat's logo and number can be firmly identified, it is proposed that this is a view of a beach near Lisbon and that Morris came across the boat during such a visit in 1961.

Place the artist

One can learn a great deal about a person from their important life places. Morris was born to Annie and George Grassie in 1931 in Scotland. George was missing in action in Burma for several war years, and when he returned in 1946, he set up a small business, a sweet shop in James Street, Arbroath. Morris's diaries and conversations of that time reveal that he was close to his parents and to his little sister, Irene. Though not well-off, the family was sufficiently comfortable whilst he grew up.

He attended Arbroath High School, studied art under William Reid and Talbert McLean and, as was described, met and was advised by warden James Cowie at Hospitalfield. Leaving school with the art medal in 1948, he attended Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee, learning from and forming long-term professional relationships with tutors Alberto Morrocco, landscape painter McIntosh Patrick, sculptor Scott Sutherland and the McKenzie sisters, Winifred and Alison. At Hospitalfield, during two separate student residencies with warden Ian Fleming, he painted large harbour scenes. Graduating with a first-class award and a highly commended post-graduate diploma, he won a travelling scholarship to Paris and was presented with the Royal Scottish Academy's Keith Prize for the best work by a student of any age studying Fine Art at a Scottish Art College.

Morris left Scotland in 1954 to fulfil his national service. He was unusual, having attended a Local Authority school, in applying for and in gaining a commission as an officer in the Royal Artillery. He served in Malta, North Africa and eventually at SHAPE in Paris as an intelligence officer on General Montgomery's staff. He returned to the UK in 1956 and, after a year teaching art in secondary schools, left on 18th January 1957 to become Head of Art at Queen's College Georgetown, British Guiana. He taught there until April 1959, also lecturing for the University of the West Indies and providing art appreciation classes for the city's adults. Leaving Guiana, he spent 6 months travelling through Central America, Mexico and the USA, painting mainly portraits and tropical landscapes. Shortly after returning to Scotland, he met and later married the love of his life, Mona (ne. Spence). They settled in Edinburgh and had two children, Marissa and Andrew.

The remainder of Morris's career was in education. He joined Moray House College as a lecturer in 1963, training teachers on how to teach youngsters to engage with and practise art. He progressed through to Senior Lecturer, then Principal Lecturer, and finally to Head of the Faculty of Aesthetic Studies, retiring in 1996. Morris was responsible during these decades for training almost every teacher of art in all the schools of the East of Scotland, a hugely influential occupation. He had a larger and more significant influence on the development of art in Scotland than other artists with much higher public profiles. His substantial success and significance as a mentor are underlined by the great number of former students who kept in contact with him for advice, but also in order to share their work and ideas, long after they had left college.

Throughout this time, Morris continued to draw and paint and to exhibit at the RSA, RSW, RGI and in group exhibitions. His work is

represented in the collections of Dundee's McManus Art Gallery, Glasgow's Kelvingrove Art Gallery, Edinburgh City Art Centre, Edinburgh University, Dundee Art College and in private collections at home and abroad.

Morris died in 2023 in his own home. His children, Marissa and Andrew, continue to practise high-quality art. This is a man who was steeped in art, who immersed himself in the places where he lived, such as Arbroath and Georgetown, and who demonstrates the power of place in much of his work.

People in place

People in place are a critical part of helping to define that place for others. Morris was exceptionally interested in other people, and he therefore often sought to depict individuals. His student portfolio contains many drawings of people, fellow students, relatives and friends from Arbroath.

Also from Arbroath is this portrait of his grandfather, which was exhibited in the town when he was still at school. Morris described how his Granda was 'overcome with emotion and pride on seeing his portrait being so eminently displayed'.[17]

[17] Grassie, diary entry, 29/01/48.

13. Morris Grassie, 1948, *Granda Robbie*

In contrast, ten years later and in another place with quite different light, he captured this likeness of a young student. After the RSA